

SHIELD WEEKLY

TRUE STORIES FROM
FAMOUS CHIEFS

THE NOTE-BOOKS OF
OF POLICE



IN BAD HANDS

or Sheridan Keene's Help to Some Country Visitors

BY ALDEN F. BRADSHAW



SHIELD WEEKLY



TRUE DETECTIVE STORIES • STRANGER THAN FICTION

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IN BAD HANDS;

OR,

SHERIDAN KEENE'S HELP TO SOME COUNTRY VISITORS.

By ALDEN F. BRADSHAW.

CHAPTER I.

THE PLOT OF THE CONFIDENCE MEN.

"Can it be easily worked, think you?"

"Can it be easily worked?"

The man addressed echoed the inquiry in tones of derisive assurance, and with that particularly significant smile which, among certain types of the flash gentry and confidence men, denotes the discovery and profound appreciation of what, in the slang parlance of the same order, is commonly termed a "very soft mark."

"I should say, Sam, it could be easily worked," he hastened to add. "It can be done like rolling out of bed. It will be like money sent from home. It's a perfect cinch, Sam, or you can safely gamble I'd not have written you to come down here from New York."

"It would not have been very like you to do it, Ned, unless you thought you had struck a sure thing."

"You're right it wouldn't."

"And you should be clever enough by this time to know a sure thing from a hazard," laughed the man called Sam.

On that particular occasion he wore the conventional dress of a very respectable clergyman, and he appeared to be about sixty years old. He was less than forty, however, and a removal of the disguise he then wore would have revealed him to be a remarkably attractive and shrewd-looking man.

His full name was Samuel Rogers.

Among his most intimate friends he enjoyed the sobriquet of Slippery Sam Rogers, given him because of his rare success in

DEALER IN
NOVELS & POST CARDS,
Old files filed,
and in Your Want List
CHILL, N. Y.

hoodwinking the police, and in escaping punishment for numerous crimes and confidence games of which he had at various times been suspected. Both in New York and Chicago this same Sam Rogers, who then was posing as a gracious and benignant city parson, was known to be one of the slickest confidence men in the country.

His companion was the notorious Ned Weston, who twice had done time for swindling rural innocents out of their money and whose picture has for ten years been one of the adornments of the "Rogues' Gallery."

Yet Weston was still in the thirties, a gentlemanly and well-dressed man, who then looked far more like a prosperous young broker, if not a man of means and leisure, than like a social outcast and professional swindler.

These two men then were seated in Weston's room in the Hotel Nantucket, on the famous old island of that name, with its quaint town and quainter people. The sun of a fair June day was gilding with its last yellow rays the broad stretch of ocean sweeping away to the south, and the white sands of the shelving shore and the brown hills of the upland.

Weston had been registered at the Nantucket for nearly a month, under the name of Edward West.

Rogers had arrived there only that evening, however, by the boat from Woods Holl, and in response to a letter received from Weston in New York the previous day.

Only some felonious project could have brought them together at such a place and under such circumstances, and, in response to another inquiry by Rogers, it was presently disclosed while they sat smoking their cigars.

"What is this sure thing, Ned, and how did you happen to stumble upon it?" Rogers asked.

"Am I not always looking for sure things?" laughed Weston.

"Yes, I will admit that."

"It happened in this way," Weston explained. "Because of an uncomfortable interest which Captain Devery formed for me about a month ago, I decided it would be wise to drop out of sight for a time."

"Before you were put out of sight, eh?"

"Precisely," nodded Weston. "So I jumped New York and came down here to Nantucket. It is sufficiently out of the way thus early in the season, and the resident Reubens have a happy faculty for telling you all about their own business and asking very little about yours."

"Which rather suited you under the circumstances."

"Very much so, since a disclosure of my history would not improve my social standing here," laughed Weston, knocking the ashes from his cigar. "In that respect, by the way, I have cut a figure."

"With the wealthy hotel patrons, I presume?"

"Quite the contrary, Sam," rejoined Weston. "I rather have devoted myself to some of the native rustics, and particularly to one of that talkative contingent who relieve the traveling public of their money by casting them about this quaint old place at so much a head, filling their lungs with dust, and their ears with stories about themselves and the various points of interest."

"A driver of one of the public carriages, I take it?"

"Precisely."

"Ah, I begin to tumble," smiled Rogers, significantly. "Some one of these rustics has told you something of interest."

"Decidedly of interest," nodded Weston. "You, too, have encountered him, although you arrived but an hour ago."

"You don't mean the talkative chap who drove us up from the boat?"

"Four for one, Sam!" laughed Weston. "You have called the turn."

"What about him?"

"I'll tell you presently. I have gathered the facts while riding about with him during my stay here. He is a typical island Jehu, and as green as a growing melon. His fund of information is confined solely to things local, and to his own personal affairs; and I soon learned not only his pedigree and history, but discovered also most of his immediate plans and prospects. Since then, Sam, I have made it a point to become quite friendly with him."

"What is there in it?" smiled Rogers, through a wreath of smoke.

"About five thousand dollars."

"That's not very bad, providing it can be easily secured, and without too many risks," said Rogers, with a livelier interest. "What's the outlook?"

"Simple as two and two."

"As easy as that?" was the laughing rejoinder. "What will he do; give it to you?"

"The next thing to it," smiled Weston, elevating his heels to the window-sill. "Listen while I tell you."

"I am all ears, Ned."

"The youngster's name is Reuben Haskins. He is about twenty-three years old, and by the death of his father last winter he inherited between five and six thousand dollars. It is now in his possession."

"It's a shame for any man living on Nantucket to have as much money as that all at one time," laughed Rogers. "Is it in cash?"

"All in the long green," nodded Weston, with evident satisfaction. "The most of it, however, is now on deposit in the National bank here."

"By what game can we safely relieve him of it?"

"Haskins himself gave me the key to the situation."

"That was very good of him. What is it?"

"By the death of his father last winter he was left without relatives, and since has been lodging here at the hotel and working for his board," explained Weston. "Next week, however, he is going to be married."

"Poor fellow! Married here?"

"Not here at the hotel, but to the daughter of a farmer who lives up above here. The girl is still in her teens, and a greener couple than she and Haskins never stood in shoes."

"Go on."

"Having come into this bit of a fortune," continued Weston, "Haskins wants to invest it in securities that will pay him better than a bank's four per cent., and, partly with that object, and partly to celebrate his marriage, he intends visiting Boston on a short wedding trip."

"Ah, I see! Will he take this money with him?"

"As to that, I have given him some very friendly advice."

"I have no doubt of it."

"Oh, I have made it a point to win his confidence, and he now esteems me very highly. I have advised him to take only a certified check for the sum he intends investing."

"And that?"

"He says it will be about fifty-five hundred dollars."

"Have you told him that you could put him in a way to secure some very profitable investments?" asked Rogers, dryly.

"On the contrary, I have carefully avoided it," smiled Weston.

"For what reasons?"

"First, that he may not suspect that I have other than a very friendly and fraternal interest in him."

"And second?"

"Because he has in Boston a cousin, one James Norton, quite a wealthy and success-

ful stock broker, upon whose judgment and advice he will entirely rely in making his investments. He is, in fact, going to Boston chiefly to visit this cousin, and to invest this money."

"Where, then, do we come in?" demanded Rogers, with a rather doubtful look rising in his cold, steel-blue eyes.

"We shall come in winners at the finish."

"How so? If Norton, the cousin, is to be his adviser——"

"Ah, but wait one moment!" interrupted Weston, raising his finger. "Haskins has never laid eyes on his cousin, and doesn't know him personally from a side of sole-leather."

"Never seen him!"

"Never!" reiterated Weston, with a significant smile. "Haskins has never been off this island from the day of his birth, and Norton has never visited it. They are acquainted through a very limited correspondence, and the two men never have met personally."

"Are Norton's parents dead?"

"Yes, for several years. He is a bachelor, and has rooms at the Riverview and an office in State street."

"They may have seen photographs of one another," suggested Rogers.

"I have made sure of the contrary."

"And the actual extent of their acquaintance?"

"Is next to nothing," declared Weston, with assurance. "They know of one another's existence as cousins and that's about all."

"And this correspondence?"

"It has consisted of four or five letters only, relating chiefly to Haskins' desire to invest his money, and because of which Norton finally invited him to become his guest in town for a few days."

"Have you anything more than Haskins' word for this?"

"I have seen Norton's letters to him."

"And they indicate?"

"That the two men are as good as total strangers."

"Then if I——"

"Finish it, Sam!" exclaimed Weston, with an approving laugh. "Then if you were to meet Haskins and his young wife on their arrival in Boston, and were to personate——"

"One moment! Has Norton intimated in any of his letters that he will meet them?"

"Yes; at the Terminal station on their arrival."

"He must be prevented!" suddenly exclaimed Rogers, with a quick appreciation of the possibilities of the situation. "He must be prevented, and I will meet them instead!"

"That's the very idea, Sam."

"I easily can personate Norton, since neither Haskins nor his wife have ever seen him."

"It will be child's play after I have given you all the points concerning Haskins."

"I now see why you have been cultivating his friendship," laughed Rogers. "Have you a plan fully laid out?"

"From beginning to end."

"Let's hear it."

Ned Weston tossed the remnant of his cigar from the open window, and produced a second.

"Here it is in a nutshell, Sam," he explained. "Haskins is to be married one week from to-day, and intends leaving for Boston with his bride immediately after the ceremony. I cannot yet tell at just what hour they will arrive in Boston, but you must be there to meet them."

"Go on; I follow you."

"Haskins has written Norton, however, that he may be expected one week from to-day."

"Suppose there should be any change of plan?"

"I have calculated to head that off. I shall remain here, keeping well in touch with Haskins, and if he changes his plan I will wire you."

"And I will act accordingly," Rogers nodded, approvingly. "Really, Ned, it begins to look easy."

"I have Norton's address," continued Weston, "and the day before Haskins is married I will drop the Boston broker a letter bearing Haskins' signature, stating that the wedding has been briefly postponed because of the bride's sudden illness, and that the visit will not be made until a week later."

"Capital!"

"My letter will, of course, prevent Norton from taking any further interest in the matter for a week at least, and he will not come to the station to meet them. That will make it perfectly easy for you to meet them instead and to pretend to be Norton."

"Leave that part of it to me, Ned," laughed Rogers.

"I wrote you to come on here in this ministerial guise, in order that you may have a look at Haskins and take his measure, without his seeing you in your true colors. Also to give him the impression that I am a member of your church, and a very desirable acquaintance," laughed Weston. "I also have told him that I shall be in Boston about the time he is there, which will simplify explanations when I happen to run across you, and enable us to work the con. game in company. Are you on?"

"Perfectly!" nodded Rogers, with an approving smile. "It is really too simple. As a matter of fact, Ned, it seems a shame to take his money. We don't half earn it."

"Yet Haskins is no fool," protested Weston, with a warning head-shake. "Your plans must be carefully laid, and——"

"Faugh!" interrupted Rogers, with a slight frown. "Do you think I am not slick

enough to pluck these country people before arousing their suspicions? I will rent an office in Boston, and a suite of furnished apartments, and Haskins and his bride shall be entertained like nabobs—with his own money!"

"That's the very caper, Sam."

"And when the time is ripe, I will suggest some very elegant investments for him, and present him with some finely engraved stock certificates in return for his long green. You said he would have a certified check, I think."

"He already has it."

"Good! It will be an easy matter to get him to indorse it, and to cash it at one of the Boston banks, and we thus can secure the money without even putting our hand to paper."

"Could anything be easier?" demanded Weston.

"Not if one laid awake nights to invent it," cried Rogers, with a great display of enjoyment. "As I remarked before, it seems a shame to take his money. Really, Ned, it's too easy!"

Weston burst out laughing and arose to his feet.

"Come, now, and we will take a short ride with Haskins about the town," he cried; "and you can cultivate his acquaintance and learn more precisely what he is like."

"Not a bad idea."

"In your present make-up, which is remarkably clever, by the way, you will easily impress him as an estimable city preacher, and incidentally you can cap me along as a very desirable friend for him to have made."

"Leave that to me," laughed Rogers, rising and throwing away his cigar. "I will give him to understand that you are one of the most promising lambs of my flock. Lead the way, Ned. This youngster's money is as good as ours already."

And the two men left the hotel together.

Such was the infamous scheme of a pair of as clever confidence men as there is in the country by which to rob an innocent young rustic of his little fortune.

On the following morning Slippery Sam Rogers departed for Boston to prepare things at that end, while Weston still maintained his friendly relations with Reuben Haskins, that timely knowledge of his every plan might be had.

CHAPTER II.

HASKINS LOSES HIS BRIDE.

"Here, boy!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Deliver this case for me. There's a card on it, and here's your pay."

"Right, sir! Have it there before long, sir."

"Be off, then! Come this way, Gordon."

The man from whom these crisp commands had issued was Sheridan Keene, the Boston detective.

The scene was the great Southern Union terminal station, one day, a week subsequent to the knavery discussed and planned by Sam Rogers and Weston, the two confidence men, in the Nantucket hotel.

Sheridan Keene had just arrived from Albany, where he had been sent with requisition papers to bring back to Boston the absconding embezzler, Jack Gordon, and he had been absent five days. As he came through the gateway from the train with his prisoner, and entered the long public mall of the immense station, the detective hailed the first expressman he saw, and relieved himself of his traveling case as depicted.

The great thoroughfare of the station was thronged with people hurrying to or from their trains. In either direction, through the gates of the high fence dividing the mall from nearly thirty lines of track, a moving stream of people was constantly pouring.

Under the regular schedule at that season, the Albany train arrived in the terminal station precisely on time with the train from Wood's Holl and Nantucket, five tracks below.

The party to whom Sheridan Keene had confided his suit case was a young man wearing a cap lettered: "Local Express."

With an eye to business, he next started for the gateway five tracks below, through which a crowd of arriving passengers was now emerging.

Among the foremost of these was Ned Weston, the confidence man. He also carried a suit case, almost identical in appearance with that which Tony Marks, the expressman, had received from Sheridan Keene. Wishing to follow the movements of Reuben Haskins and his young wife, whom he knew to be on the train from which he had just alighted, and who should presently be met by his confederate in the confidence game, Weston also hurriedly called the approaching expressman to rid himself of his burden, not observing that Marks already carried a case so nearly like his own.

"Leave this at the Reynolds for me, expressman!" he hastily commanded, anxious to get out of sight before Haskins could approach and observe him.

"Yes, sir; within an hour!"

"That will be soon enough," said Weston, hurrying to pay him and slip away across the station.

As he went he caught sight of Sam Rogers in the moving throng, and hastened in his direction, pausing only to say:

"They were on the third car back of me, Sam! Look out for them!"

"Leave them to me."

"See me later at the Reynolds."

"Without fail."

Then Weston darted away and hid himself in the crowd.

At the same moment Sheridan Keene passed by with his prisoner. He did not particularly observe the two men, with neither of whom he had ever come in contact; but he chanced to notice a well-dressed, middle-aged woman some little distance away, who was scrutinizing with eager gaze the throng of arrivals by this train from the country districts.

"Maud Placer, eh! And up to her old game!" thought the detective, with a quick frown showing about his observant eyes. "She will have to be run in for another fine, the she-devil!"

The woman who had occasioned these reprehensive sentiments in Sheridan Keene was a notorious suburban character, who ran a small hotel or road-house just out of the city limits; and who, under the outward appearance of respectability, had acquired a considerable fortune by leading unsophisticated strangers into the pathways of sin and vice.

But Sheridan Keene already had a prisoner in charge, who must be hurried to headquarters, and he could not delay to question Maud Placer, to learn if her mission there was any less disreputable than usual. Neither did he see the meeting that occurred a moment later, when Sam Rogers elbowed his way through the crowd to accost the young couple he saw approaching.

The swindler now was attired in the height of fashion, and was a very attractive man. Any stranger would have taken him for a perfect gentleman, and his smile was as innocent and winsome as that of a girl.

He presented a vivid contrast to Reuben Haskins and his youthful bride. Though both were neatly dressed, one easily could see that they came from the country, and now beheld the great city for the first time.

A bootblack hurrying by winked to a newsboy, and cried with a grin and a toss of his head in their direction:

"Git onto the Rubes, Jimmy! Them's the latest fashions in Podunk!"

But Slippery Sam Rogers greeted these country visitors with hand extended, and smoothly inquired, with a genial smile:

"Isn't this my cousin, Reuben Haskins, and his young bride?"

"Wal, how did you know me from all these 'ere folk!" exclaimed Reuben, accepting his hand. "I 'spose you're my cousin, Mr. Norton, ain't you?"

"Yes; and very glad to see you," said Rogers. "I saw our family resemblance in your face, Cousin Reuben, and knew you at once."

"Wal, now, who'd have thought it! Durned if I look much like you, for all your ma was my aunt," cried Reuben, with an admiring stare at the swindler's handsome face and fine clothes.

Rogers laughed and shook hands with Mrs. Haskins, who was a buxom girl of nineteen, with bright eyes and cheeks as red as apples.

"And this is your pretty wife, I take it," said he, bowing. "I am glad to congratulate you both, and, as it's customary, I'll kiss the bride. Awfully pleased that you're now one of our family, Mrs. Haskins."

"Oh, Mr. Norton! Right before all these 'ere folks!" exclaimed the girl, blushing harder than ever.

"These people have business of their own to look after, and pay very little attention to us," the swindler laughed pleasantly, taking each by the arm. "Come out this way with me, and we'll take a carriage to my apartments. I want you to make your home with me while you are here."

"That's very good of you, Mr. Norton."

"Hang hold of Sally there, Cousin Jim," put in Haskins, with ludicrous misgivings. "Gee whiz! how easy a feller could lose her in a place like this."

"I'll look after her, Cousin Reuben."

"I never see sich a big building in all my born days, only in picturs. I am slewed already. I reckon I'd git lost before I'd sot foot in the street if I was alone."

"I'll take care you don't get lost. Have you a check for your trunk?"

"B'gosh, I come near forgittin' that," laughed Reuben, abruptly halting. "Sally's got it. She was so tarnal skeered I'd lose it she took it along with my other valuables. It's only for a carpet-bag, Cousin Jim. We didn't bring a trunk."

"We haven't got very many clothes, you know," smiled Sally Haskins, undoing a button of her waist and fishing out a small pocketbook to produce the desired check.

Rogers took it, wondering if she had charge also of the certified check on which he was designing to realize a handsome profit for these polite attentions; but he saw nothing of it in the interior of her pocketbook, and decided that Haskins had had sense enough to retain it.

"I will give this to an expressman outside, and have the baggage brought to my rooms for you," said he. "Now we'll go along."

"You ain't seen nothing of Ned West down here, have you?" Reuben innocently demanded, as they proceeded through the long station toward Dewey-Square.

Rogers flashed a sharp glance at the young man's sun-browned face, but saw at once that his question had not been prompted by suspicion.

"I know a man named Ned West," the swindler artfully rejoined, "but I've not seen him recently."

"Wal, you wouldn't be likely to, for he's been down our way for a month back," explained Haskins. "He said he was coming down to Boston yesterday, and I didn't know but you'd run acrost him."

"Then you're acquainted with him?"

"Purty well."

"He's a nice fellow."

"Durned if he ain't! He told me just how to fetch my money up here, so 'twould be safest, and lots of things I must look out for down here."

"Did he?"

"Durned if he didn't! He said the town was full of sharks, and I'd better stick close to you all the time, Cousin Jim, or else they'd git me for sure."

"Don't have any fears, Reuben," laughed Rogers. "I'll see that nobody gets your money but myself."

"Oh, I reckon I've headed 'em off, if they're out looking for me."

"That's so?"

"All I fetched was a sartified check, as they call it, and all I've got to do is lug it in one of the Boston banks to git it cashed. Sally's got it now, she was so tarnal skeered I'd lose it!"

"Wal, it's only a little slip of paper, and Rube's so awful keerless 'bout sich things," put in Sally, looking up to explain. "So I made sure 'twould be safe, you see, by sewing it inside of my corset cover."

"Shut up, Sally! Lord sakes alive, be you going to tell the whole town where you put it?"

"Wal, it's where no one will git it, that's sure!"

"I think all of us together will be able to look after it," interposed Rogers, laughing. "To-morrow or next day, Reuben, you shall visit my office with me, and I'll advise you about investing the money."

"It'll have to be to-morrow, Cousin Jim," said Reuben. "I reckon I ain't going to stay down here only till to-morrow."

"But that's a very short visit!" exclaimed the swindler, nevertheless much pleased by the prospect of securing the money so quickly.

"Wal, I've got my cattle and hosses to look after, and I'll have to git back hum purty quick," Reuben innocently explained. "I reckon one day'll do down here for me. Jehosaphat! look at them buildings, Sally! And what a tarnal noise! It makes a feller's head go round just lookin' at——"

"This way! this way!" cried Rogers, hurriedly.

Even this self-possessed swindler was somewhat excited by the unexpected event that occurred immediately after their leaving the station.

As they emerged into Dewey Square, the sound of the fire alarm fell on their ears, and from a large building half a block away great clouds of black smoke were already pouring.

The hundreds of people outside the station were rushing helter-skelter in all directions. Cabs were flying this way and that, and the electric cars then congested in the square were making strenuous efforts to open a clear way for the approaching fire engines.

Amid all of this confusion of rushing people and vehicles arose the noisy clang of the car bells, the cries of excited men, and the vociferous commands of half a score of policemen.

"Come this way!" cried Rogers, dragging his startled and dismayed companions after him. "We have time to get across the square! Stick close to me!"

Reuben and Sally Haskins obeyed him blindly, too confused to do otherwise, and they started over the long crossing to an opposite corner fifty yards away.

"Hurry up!" shouted Rogers, rushing them directly in front of an approaching car. "We can get a carriage over yonder!"

He wished to avoid the delay which he knew would result from the roping off of the streets, and, heedless of the girl's frightened protests, he hurried them over the long crossing.

They did not succeed in reaching the opposite sidewalk, however, before the folly of the swindler's attempt became manifest. From around the near corner one of the fire engines suddenly appeared, rushing straight upon them. The plunging horses, the warning clang of the gong, the yells of startled observers, the sudden and frightful imminence of their danger—all combined to turn the head of Sally Haskins and fill her with ungovernable terror.

She obeyed the first impulse born of her fright.

She tore her arm free from Rogers' grasp and darted back the way she had come.

A policeman hastened her flight by a rude shove and a vociferous command for her to get off the street. She reached the opposite sidewalk, completely turned round by her excitement and alarm, and there she was seized in the surging crowd of people, and swept on and away as a feather is borne in a rushing current.

When finally she fairly got her feet, and realized that she was out of immediate personal danger, she was far from the station and utterly lost as to its location.

She stared about in helpless confusion. The tumultuous crowd still was dense around her, and only strange and excited faces met her frightened gaze. Policemen were now roping off the streets. The building half a block away was in flames. Thick clouds of smoke shut out her view in the direction whence she had come, and the rumble and roar of the arriving engines, the clang of gongs, and the wild cries and commands of hurrying firemen, sounded like the discord of Bedlam in her dismayed ears.

"Fall back there!" cried a policeman, forcibly urging back the crowd. "Fall back to the next block!"

With the aid of half a dozen men he was roping out the press of people from the im-

mediate locality of the threatening conflagration.

And Sally Haskins helplessly obeyed, falling back and back with the crowd, until she was nearly two blocks from the spot on which she had been separated from Rogers and her husband.

Meantime they had gained the corner desired, and Haskins turned to look for his bride.

"Gee whiz!" he cried, in alarm. "Where's Sally!"

"She was frightened and ran back," cried Rogers, inwardly cursing this stroke of ill luck, and foreseeing the possible consequences. "I lost my hold upon her."

"B'gosh, she's got to be found!" exclaimed Reuben, staring aghast at the confusing spectacle. "She's got my check, and there'll be the devil to pay if she's lost!"

"We'll find her! Come this way! Come this way, and stick close to me. We'll find her presently."

And they went this way and that way, forcing a passage through the crowd in all directions, and for two long hours kept up a ceaseless search for the missing girl.

But despite their strenuous efforts to discover her, Sally Haskins was nowhere to be found; and the disconcerted swindler, cursing the fact that she should have had the check on which he was designing to realize, was forced to the disagreeable conclusion that his game had, for a time, at least, become most seriously blocked.

CHAPTER III.

SHERIDAN KEENE MAKES A DISCOVERY.

Sheridan Keene delivered his prisoner at headquarters that day, and left him in the custody of Chief Inspector Watts.

"Have you any other assignment for me to-day, chief?" he inquired, after he had relieved himself of his charge.

"Nothing at present, Detective Keene," replied Chief Watts. "There is a serious fire down near the Southern Union station, but I've already sent several inspectors over there. Why did you ask?"

"I thought I would run up home for a bath and a change of clothing," Keene explained. "I have been away five days, you know."

"Go ahead, then," nodded the chief. "You may remain off duty until to-morrow morning."

"I will report then as usual," bowed Keene, as he withdrew; and without delay he started for his lodgings in Dartmouth street.

It was about four o'clock when he entered the house, and he encountered his landlady in the hall, with whom he shook hands in greeting.

"I suppose my suit case has been brought up, hasn't it?" he asked, as he started up the stairs.

"Yes, Mr. Keene," she replied. "The expressman left it here about half an hour ago. I took it up to your room."

"Thank you," nodded the detective.

But on reaching his room Sheridan Keene met with a rather startling surprise. The first thing to catch his eye when he entered the chamber was the suit case, which his landlady had placed in one of the chairs.

"This is not mine!" he exclaimed to himself. "The expressman has made a mistake!"

The occasion for the error was plainly apparent, however. The case was so nearly like his own that a careless expressman, having two to deliver, might easily have left the wrong one.

"The careless fellow has left this and delivered mine elsewhere," muttered Keene, not much pleased by the circumstance. "I wonder whose this may be."

He examined it more closely, and found

that it had no card upon it by which he might possibly have discovered where his own property had been left.

"Perhaps I can learn by opening it."

Placing it on the bed, he quickly loosed the hasps and threw it open. The contents were about what he had expected—a carefully packed supply of clothing, evidently that of a man, and a folded smoking-jacket in one side.

Tossed carelessly into the case, however, was a letter. Evidently it had been thrown in at a last moment, and when the owner very possibly did not happen to have on the coat in which he habitually carried his correspondence.

"Ah, this will tell me to whom the case belongs," said Keene to himself, taking up the letter.

The envelope bore the superscription—"E. West, Esq., Nantucket, Mass."

"E. West," muttered the detective thoughtfully. "I don't recall the name. Evidently he has just come up from Nantucket, since this envelope bears the postmark of yesterday."

With no other designs than that of rectifying the expressman's mistake as soon as possible, Sheridan Keene drew out the written sheet and read it.

The page was without a printed heading and read as follows:

"BOSTON, June 23d.

"DEAR NED: Your wire received. Am glad to know that the pigeons will fly this way at the time anticipated. I will be on hand to pluck them. Have piped off N. at his office, and leave you to wire him to-morrow morning as agreed. Don't neglect it. Shall expect you up by the same train with hayseeds, or the one after, and will contrive to meet you as suggested. It should be easy money.

Yours hastily,
S."

It did not take Sheridan Keene long to grasp the probable significance of such a

missive. Before he had fairly finished his perusal of it, his face had undergone a change which neither the writer nor the recipient of the letter would have found pleasant to contemplate.

"Well, well! this looks very much like a confidence game of some kind," he said to himself, still studying the letter. "Be on hand to pluck them, eh! I'll see about that, Mr. S., whoever you may be! Very evidently I am not off duty until to-morrow!"

Already he had resolved to investigate the affair; and, after a few minutes' consideration of the matter, he decided upon the most promising method by which to discover the owner of the suit case.

"I can locate him by looking up the expressman," he reasoned; "but that seems hardly necessary. Knowing this letter to be in his case, Mr. West will be even more anxious to recover his own baggage than I was. The address being on my case, it is safe to assume that I shall have a visit from this man West, directly after he discovers the expressman's mistake. I will prepare to meet him. Luckily, however, my own name is not on my case, and he will not suspect me of being Sheridan Keene, even if he has ever heard of me."

Having a fictitious name on his baggage was but one of this detective's precautions when traveling, in order that his identity might not be thus discovered. The name then on the tag attached to his suit case was S. Kennedy, though the street and number of his lodgings were, of course, correct.

Keene now carefully replaced the letter precisely as he had found it, and, having relocked the case, he stood it in a corner of his chamber.

Then he hastened down-stairs to his landlady, to whom he explained the circumstances and told his suspicions.

"I am quite certain that I've accidentally

stumbled upon a swindling scheme, Mrs. Dodge, which is already in operation," he informed her. "Furthermore, I think the owner of the case up-stairs is likely to call here to get it, and to leave mine, as soon as he discovers the blunder. I want you to keep out of sight, should he do so, and allow me to answer his ring at the door."

"Very well, Mr. Keene."

"And do not pay any attention to what I may do," added Keene; "and don't put in an appearance until after the stranger has gone. I wish to discover if my suspicion is justified, and it may take a little time."

"I will not interfere," said Mrs. Dodge, willingly giving him the assurance desired.

Keene then hastened up to his room again. Having removed the key from the door, he placed the suit case directly opposite across the room, so that he could see it from the door by peering through the keyhole.

Next he assumed the disguise of an old gentleman, quickly effecting the change by means of materials which he constantly kept on hand, both in his chamber and in his closet at headquarters.

He scarce had completed the metamorphosis, however, when he heard a carriage drive rapidly up the street and stop outside. The next moment the ring of the doorbell sounded noisily through the house.

"I was right," he said to himself, as he hastened down-stairs to answer the summons.

Ned Weston stood on the front steps, with the detective's suit case in his hand.

"Does Mr. Kennedy live here, sir?" he demanded.

Keene gave his voice the tremulous hesitancy of the old man he appeared to be, and politely answered:

"Yes, sir, he does; but he is not at home this afternoon."

"Do you know when he will come in, sir?"

"Very likely not before evening," replied

Keene. "He has been away for nearly a week, and I cannot say just when he will return to the house. But I know he is in town, sir, for his traveling case has been left here by an expressman."

"But the expressman made a mistake," said Weston, displaying the case he had in his hand. "He left Mr. Kennedy's case at my address, and mine is probably the one he left here. I wish to exchange them and get my own."

"That was curious," murmured Keene, taking the occasion to carefully fix Weston's face in his mind. "Can you tell your own when you see it?"

"Certainly I can! And here is Mr. Kennedy's card on this one, by which I discovered where he lives."

"You can come up to Mr. Kennedy's room, sir, and see if yours is the case the expressman left," said Keene, leading the way to the chamber.

"Yes, that is mine," cried Weston, the moment he saw the case in the room.

"Are you quite sure of it?" faltered Keene.

"Certainly I am! I will take it, if you please, and leave Mr. Kennedy his own."

"Well, well, I don't know," Keene doubtfully demurred. "I am not sure it will be all right, sir. I think you'd better wait till Mr. Kennedy comes in."

"Nonsense, sir," protested Weston. "You can see for yourself that this is Mr. Kennedy's case. Here is his card on it. The mistake is only that of the expressman."

"Well, well, sir, I'll speak to my wife," said the detective, still hesitating. "If she says I'd better let you exchange them, I'll come back in a moment and tell you."

"Very well, sir," nodded Weston. "But kindly hurry, sir, for I am in haste."

Keene shambled out of the room, closing the door after him.

Then he dropped to his knee and looked through the keyhole.

The very thing occurred which he had anticipated.

The moment he found himself alone, Ned Weston, satisfied that his case had not been opened, and apprehensive lest he might be prevented from removing it, dropped quickly to his knee and hastily opened it, taking out the letter and thrusting it into his pocket.

Sheridan Keene needed no further assurance that some kind of a swindle or confidence game was really in operation, and a sense of duty which he never disregarded required him to follow up the clew he so curiously had struck.

Quickly slipping down to the front door, he softly opened it and beckoned the hackman to the steps.

"Where do you come from, driver?" he demanded, curtly.

"From the Reynolds, sir," said the driver, looking at him in some surprise.

"Is your passenger a guest there?"

"Well, sir, I——"

"Answer me!" Keene sharply commanded, displaying his badge when the hackman faltered. "I am one of the Boston inspectors, and if you evade me in any way, it will cost you your license."

"Beg pardon, sir."

"Again, is your passenger a guest at the Reynolds?"

"I cannot say for sure, sir," the hackman now readily answered. "He engaged me on the street."

"Did he have his traveling case with him when he engaged you?"

"No, sir; he went into the hotel and got it."

"Now, follow my instructions, and without betraying me to him," said Keene, sharply.

"I'll do so, sir."

"When you take him from here, if he directs you to the Reynolds, drive so slowly that I can reach there before him."

"All right, sir."

"If you leave him anywhere else," continued Keene; "note the place and observe where he goes, and then drive to the Reynolds and tell me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"See, then, that you do it! Now get back to your carriage."

As the driver returned, Keene softly closed the door and hastened up to his chamber.

"Well, sir, what does your wife say?" demanded Weston, the minute he entered.

"She says for you to take it, sir," replied Keene, bowing and waving his hand toward the suit case. "She says the expressman must have made the mistake, sir."

"Of course he made it!" cried Weston, curtly. "Evidently your wife has more brains than you have."

And without more ado, the swindler took his own case and hastened from the room and down the stairs.

"More brains, eh!" laughed Sheridan Keene, hurriedly removing his disguise and slipping the materials for sundry other facial changes into his pocket. "We'll see who is best supplied with brains, Mr. West! Now for the Reynolds!"

CHAPTER IV.

QUICK WORK.

Sheridan Keene broke all his previous records in his pursuit of Ned Weston, and in the series of remarkable strategies by which he followed up the mystery, upon a mere pointer to which he so unexpectedly and curiously had stumbled.

His movements were so rapid that, when he emerged to Dartmouth street, the hack containing Ned Weston had reached only the corner of Huntington avenue, into which thoroughfare it then was turning.

Hastening to a cab-stand in Copley square, Keene luckily ran upon a driver with whom he was personally acquainted, and

with his own hands snatched the blanket from the horse and tossed it upon the box.

"To the Reynolds, Larry, at the top of your speed!" he cried, to the astonished Jehu. "Do you see that hack now nearing the Brunswick?"

"Yes, Detective Keene!"

"Slip through one of the side streets and pass it. I wish to reach the hotel first, and without the inmate of that carriage suspecting anything."

"I am on, sir!"

"Be off, then, and drop me at the corner of Washington street."

The cabman obeyed his instructions to the letter, and at the end of five minutes the detective sprang down at the point mentioned.

He knew he was well in advance of the other carriage; and, having paid his fare, he quickly entered the hotel office and ran over the names that day entered upon the register. The name of E. West was not among them.

Although he had an appointment there with Rogers, Ned Weston had calculated upon passing the night in the furnished apartments rented by the former, and hence had not registered, having sent his case there merely for convenience.

Though well known to the hotel clerk, Keene had signified with a glance that he did not wish to be recognized.

On failing to find the name he had sought on the register, the detective took a seat in an obscure corner of the office and buried himself behind a newspaper, to wait the arrival of his man.

He did not particularly notice a tall, well-dressed gentleman, who was moving nervously about the office. Neither Rogers nor Weston were familiar characters in Boston, and, despite that the latter's photograph was in the Rogues' Gallery, Keene never had had occasion to especially observe it. If in

this respect he was somewhat at a disadvantage, not knowing either of these confidence men, he had in return the advantage of not being known by them.

With the letter he had read serving as his only clew to the nature of the game he felt sure was being played, and without the slightest idea as to the identity of the several parties involved, this clever officer patiently waited the arrival of the man with the suit case, known only to him as E. West, Nantucket, Mass.

He had not long to wait, however.

Presently a hack drew up at the curbing, and Weston sprang down and entered the hotel office. The first man he beheld was Sam Rogers, who had been nervously awaiting him, and the two men met nearly opposite where Keene was seated.

"That slick-looking fellow may have been the writer of the letter," Keene quickly decided, while he furtively watched them and strained his ears for an occasional word passed between them.

"Where have you been?" demanded Rogers, the moment they met. "You were to be here at four."

"It's lucky I am here at all," said Weston, curtly. "I've had a deuced close call."

"What do you mean?"

"It was owing to a mistake made by the expressman, who should have left my case here. He left it at a house up-town, and your last letter was in it. It's all right now, however."

"That's not a marker to what's befallen me," said Rogers, grimly.

"The game isn't up!" gasped Weston, momentarily dismayed.

"Oh, no; only badly blocked! Let's go into the café and have a drink or two. We can take a table by ourselves, and I then will tell you just what has happened."

"Wait until I've checked this baggage," said Weston. "It's an infernal nuisance."

Enough of the last had reached the ears of Sheridan Keene to determine his action. He knew that he would have two or three minutes in which to accomplish the design that had instantly arisen in his mind.

Quickly leaving the hotel office, he hastened through the corridor and into the café. Several tables in a remote corner of the room were vacant, and the waiter assigned to them was standing idle near the wall. Keene quickly caught his eye and beckoned him to follow, then slipped into a booth near by and dropped the curtain.

"Did you beckon to me, sir?" asked the waiter, presently thrusting in his head.

"Yes," said Keene, softly. "Come in here."

"You're not daffy, are you?"

"Far from it," curtly answered the detective, quickly displaying his badge. "I am after two men who will, I think, presently take seats at one of your tables. Come out of that apron and cap and loan them to me. I wish to serve the men in your place, that I may discover their game, if possible."

"This is on the level, is it?" demanded the waiter, rather doubtfully.

"You'll find it is very much on the level, if you don't do precisely what I bid you!" said Keene, sternly, as he hurriedly removed his coat and hat.

"I will take your word for it, sir."

"That's a wise conclusion, my friend. My name is Sheridan Keene——"

"Oh, the deuce you say!" the waiter interrupted, with a startled look. "Here's the apron, sir, and the cap!"

"Good for you!" nodded the detective, hurriedly tying the long white apron about him. "Now, sir, you put on my coat and hat, and presently go out to the coat-room and wait there until I come for them. Do just that and nothing else!"

"All right, sir."

"Follow these instructions to the letter, mind you, or you'll find yourself in warm water."

"I'll not fail you, sir," said the waiter, assuringly.

The steps of two men passing the booth gave Sheridan Keene the cue he wanted. He stepped out through the curtain, and fell in almost at the heels of Rogers and Weston, as they walked to the furthestmost table in the room.

Neither of them, nor a person in the café, in fact, had observed this little episode; and when the two swindlers took their chairs, Sheridan Keene, in cap and apron, carelessly tossed each a napkin from the tumblers on the table, and coolly waited their orders.

"Two Manhattans," said Rogers, looking up.

"Any lunch?"

"Want anything to eat, Sam?"

"No, not a mouthful."

"That's all, waiter."

"And this is the beginning!" thought Keene, as he took a tray and departed. "Evidently the S at the end of that letter stood for Sam."

He did not expect to overhear much that was said at the table, but of a word here and there he knew he now could make volumes.

Ignoring the curious glances of one of the waiters, who now observed him, Keene went out to the bar, whispered a few words to the bartender, and the latter at once hastened to mix the cocktails ordered.

"Why did you put my letter in your suit case?" frowned Rogers, immediately upon Keene's departure.

"My coat happened to be in the wash-room of the hotel, and I tossed the letter into the case while packing it," explained Weston. "I now know it was a fool's trick, of course, but there's no harm done."

"Are you sure the case has not been opened? That letter would have been a dead give-away."

"I am sure of it, Sam," returned Weston, petulantly. "The man whose case I found here had not returned home when I went to make the exchange. What's wrong with you, and where is Haskins?"

"I've left him in my rooms, with orders not to venture out of doors before I return," growled Rogers, evidently in very bad humor. "He's in a devil's own stew, and we're in a worse one."

Weston's face took on an expression of surprise and consternation.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"We've lost the girl."

"Lost her!"

"Like a needle in a haystack," said Rogers, grimly. "She was separated from us directly after we left the station, owing to the fire just then and there; and though we did our best, and searched high and low, we could not find her."

"By the gods, that indeed makes a bad mess of it!"

"And the worst of it is, Ned, she's got the certified check with her."

"The devil you say!"

"Devil or no devil, it's the truth," returned Rogers, with a dismal frown.

"What have you done about it?"

"What could I do? I finally prevailed upon the fool of a countryman——"

"Your drinks, gents!" said Sheridan Keene, placing the glasses before them, and pausing only to write on a slip procured at the bar the price of their order.

Then he withdrew as far as the next table, where he stood with his back toward them, staring about the long room, and apparently deaf to, and without interest in, whatever they might say.

Yet Sam Rogers instinctively lowered his voice.

"I finally prevailed upon the infernal hayseed to give up the search for the girl," he continued; "and we left the station and went up to my rooms."

"And he is now there?" demanded Weston.

"Yes, and in a peck of trouble over losing her."

"How did you manage to leave him?"

"I told him I would go out and start the whole police force in search of the wench," explained Rogers. "He wanted to come, also, but I soon convinced him that he only would impede my movements; and, as the recovery of the girl is now of chief importance to him, he finally suffered me to go out alone."

"Will he remain there?"

"I made him swear himself black and blue that he would, and I am satisfied he will. He's had his fill of city life already. Once he recovers his wife, and makes his investments, he will pack himself back to his hens and cattle flying."

"He doesn't mistrust anything, does he?"

"Not he!" said Rogers, smiling faintly.

"He has perfect confidence in me. But for losing the girl, and the check along with her, we'd have had the thing done brown by this time, and have been well away."

"It's beastly luck!" muttered Weston, shaking his head.

"The girl must be found, and that's all there is to it," said Rogers, decisively.

"But how? We cannot call in the help of the police."

"I should say not."

"And it's a risk to advertise. How long, think you, can we keep Haskins on a string?"

"For several days, surely," said Rogers. "You see, he depends entirely upon me, and it's dead easy to blind him. I'll take you along when I return to him, and we'll give

him to understand that we both are doing everything possible to locate his wife. I'd give a cold thousand if I could place her this very day. Here, waiter, repeat this order!"

Sheridan Keene started like a man suddenly brought out of a dream, and returned to the table.

"Same, gents?"

"Yes."

"Right, sir!"

And once more Sheridan Keene started for the bar.

"So they have lost a girl," he said to himself, reasoning shrewdly from the few words he had been able to catch.

"And evidently a girl from the country, who is here with her husband. Mr. Sam's letter termed them hayseeds. Lost about the Union station this morning at the time of the fire.

"By Jove! that was about the time I left there! And about the time I saw—Eureka! I'll take a chance I can hit the yellow center!

"Mr. Sam, I'll make a bid for that cold thousand!"

These were the desultory thoughts of Sheridan Keene, while he stood waiting for the bartender to mix the second round of drinks.

As he returned with them to the table and the waiting men, Keene already had formed in mind the move he next would venture. Though bold in the extreme, it gave better promise than making an arrest then and there, which probably would invite only an absolute denial that he might find difficult to refute.

CHAPTER V.

A LIGHTNING CHANGE.

"Excuse me, gents!"

Both Rogers and Ned Weston looked up in surprise, not a little startled when Sheri-

dan Keene, taking an opportune moment, turned and addressed them.

Instantly both were instinctively suspicious; but the expression on the mobile face of Sheridan Keene was eminently reassuring.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded Rogers, curtly.

Keene rested a hand on either side of the table, and met with friendly eyes the upturned gaze of this brace of swindlers.

"I chanced to hear a word or two of what you just said, gents," he explained, bending slightly and lowering his voice. "If you've lost track of a girl to-day, gents, like as not I can give you a pointer to finding her."

"You can?" exclaimed Rogers, shortly, too shrewd himself to easily be caught napping.

But Sheridan Keene was eminently his superior.

"If you like, gents," he said, indifferently.

"Why do you think you can aid us?"

"Only because I heard you say you had lost track of a girl near the Union station this morning, just about the time of the big fire. I was down that way at that time, gents."

"Did you see anything of a girl about there?"

"I did, gents, and that's why I speak of it."

"What style of a girl?"

"Sort o' country like," said Keene, evasively.

"Where was she when you saw her?"

"Outside the station, gents, on Atlantic avenue."

"You don't happen to know where she went, do you?"

"I know where she might have gone, gents," replied Keene, significantly; "though I am not dead sure."

"Did she act as if lost?"

"Just like it, gents," nodded Keene. "But I didn't notice her so closely as I did a party who was watching her."

Rogers pricked up his ears, and Weston gave him a quick glance."

"What party?" demanded the former, with a steady scrutiny of Keene's crafty countenance.

"A woman I happen to know by sight, gents, and who's up to a game of her own most of the time," explained Keene.

"What kind of a game?"

"Laying in wait for country girls when they first land in the city."

"What's the woman's name?"

"Placer, gents, and she's a bad ticket."

"Did you see her speak to the girl?"

"No, gents, I didn't. But I saw Maude Placer watching her, and follow her down the street; then I lost sight of them in the crowd. There may be nothing in it, gents, but I thought I'd give you the tip. She looked like a girl Maude Placer would be looking to lead off, if she saw the chance."

And Sheridan Keene turned away again, as if he really had no further interest in the matter.

He was taking a long chance, yet making at the same time an extremely shrewd calculation, that Maude Placer, whom he that morning had observed at the Union station, had indeed run upon this country girl as he had suggested. Whether or not this should prove to be the fact, he knew that these swindlers would snap at the bare possibility, and speedily would investigate the matter; and he already had planned how he now could follow their movements.

"By Jove! there may be something in this fellow's story," whispered Weston, leaning over the table to address his confederate.

"Do you think so?" demanded Rogers.

"I do, Sam! Where else would the girl have gone? You certainly should have been able to find her, if she had not been led away."

"That's true."

"Let's look into the matter. It won't take a great while."

"Wait a bit," said Rogers, softly. "I'll question this fellow further."

"Go ahead."

"Here, waiter."

"Yes, sir."

And Keene returned to the table.

"What time was it when you saw the Placer woman following the girl?"

"Not far from noon, sir."

"You're sure of the woman?"

"Oh, I know Maude Placer well enough!"

"Is she located here in town?"

"No, sir, not in town. She keeps a road-house several miles out."

"What sort of a joint?"

"Well," said Keene, smiling significantly, "you'd not want your wife there."

"Can you take us to the place?"

"No, gents, I cannot; for I am obliged to stay here," replied Keene, shaking his head.

"But I've a friend outside who can."

"What friend?"

"His name is Jim Kerrigan, and he drives a hack. He knows the place well, and the shortest way. If you say so, gents, I'll slip out and see if he's about here."

"Do so, and let us know," nodded Rogers, approvingly. "And say! if things turn right, you'll quit no loser for this information. Say nothing about it."

Keene winked understandingly and bowed.

"You needn't fear I'll know more than you wish, gents," he said, with crafty significance.

"I am on the make when it's safe, and so is Jim Kerrigan. You can trust him, gents, as far as you can see him."

"Good!" said Rogers. "See if he is outside, and come and tell us. Bring in two more drinks when you come."

"Right, sir."

Keene took his tray and again hastened to the bar, leaving the order.

Then he went quickly to the coat-room, where he found the waiter as instructed.

"Give me my coat and hat for a minute, and remain here until I return," he commanded.

A moment later he appeared on the sidewalk near Washington street, and accosted the driver of a landau drawn up at the curb-ing.

"I want your livery and your carriage for an hour or two, Macklin," he said, familiarly.

"What's up, Inspector Keene?" demanded the driver, who was well acquainted with the detective.

"I suspect a rather clever con. game, and am running down two parties for the proof," Keene hurriedly explained. "I want to drive them out to Maude Placer's, and must have your livery and carriage. I will return them within an hour or two."

"All right, sir."

"I'll explain later," added Keene. "Leave the team here, and go into the hotel coat-room and wait until I come. Have your coat and hat ready for me, so I can make a quick change."

"I will be there, sir."

A moment later Sheridan Keene returned in cap and apron with the drinks ordered by Rogers, and placed them on the table.

"Well?" demanded the latter, inquiringly.

Keene bent down and said, softly:

"I've seen Kerrigan, sir. He'll drive you out there whenever you are ready."

"Good!"

"You'll find him and his team down near the corner. It's an open landau, and he's a fellow about my size, with a big black mustache. You'll know him by that, and his long bottle-green coat with silver buttons."

"I can find him."

"I told him you'd show up a little later. He's gone for a beer."

"We'll go out as soon as we have finished these drinks," Rogers nodded, approvingly.

"Here is your pay, and a dollar for your

kindness. There'll be more coming if you prove to have been right."

"Thanks, gents!"

Sheridan Keene took the tip without the slightest compunction. It was rather a novel experience, that of having a swindler pay him for his own undoing.

Returning quickly to the bar, Keene next settled the bill accrued, and gave the bartender a cautionary wink.

Then he hastened to the coat-room.

Both the waiter and Macklin, the driver, were awaiting him.

With skill born of natural cleverness and experience, Keene quickly donned a large black mustache, and with a stick of grease paint heavily blackened his eyebrows, turning his countenance into that of as tough-looking a cabman as one often encounters.

"Now your livery, Macklin," he said, hurriedly.

"Here, sir."

"Look after my coat and hat until I return. And you, waiter, be off about your business, and keep your mouth closed."

Half a minute later Sheridan Keene was on the street, so changed that his own mother would not have recognized him; and was busily engaged in removing the blankets from the horses attached to the open landau, which Macklin willingly had placed at his disposal.

Before the covering had been removed from the nigh horse, Keene heard the voice of Sam Rogers behind him.

"Is your name Kerrigan, driver?" he demanded.

Keene wheeled sharp about and touched the rim of his tall hat.

"Yes, sir," he said, in a gruff tone, utterly unlike that of the waiter who recently had served the two men. "Are you the gents Joe Gerry was telling me about?"

"The waiter?"

"Yes, sir."

"The same, Kerrigan," Rogers nodded, without misgivings. "Did he tell you what we wanted?"

"He said you wanted to go out to Maude Placer's to look after some one."

"How long a drive is it?"

"Half to three-quarters of an hour, sir."

"And the fare?"

"A five, sir."

"That's all right," said Rogers. "But I wish your carriage was closed."

"Can't throw up the tops very well, sir," said Keene, decisively.

"Never mind, then. I'll take the chance that we are not observed. Get us out there as quickly as possible, will you?"

"You'll have no fault to find, sir. Give you my word!"

"Get in, Ned."

Sheridan Keene banged the door after them, mounted with the ease of a professional Jehu to the high box, fished out Macklin's gloves from the pocket of the long coat, gathered the ribbons up over the showy pair of bays, and adroitly made a sharp turn into Boylston street, and headed for Maude Placer's road-house, six miles away.

It was then nearly five o'clock.

CHAPTER VI.

A DESIGNING FRIEND.

"What's the trouble, my dear? You appear to be lost."

These were the words that fell on the ears of Sally Haskins, when, after having been jostled this way and that by the moving crowd at the fire, she found herself far from the Union station and on the outskirts of the dense throng.

Until that moment nobody had appeared to have any interest in her; none had seemed to heed the distress plainly manifest in her pale face and dismayed eyes; and the sound

of a friendly voice was more than welcome, indeed, in such an hour of utter helplessness and despair.

She turned eagerly to look at the speaker, and beheld a stout, middle-aged woman, very nicely dressed, and with a most kind and motherly expression on her fleshy face.

But the expression was a mask, and the woman was a fiend in the guise of a friend. The woman was she whom Sheridan Keene had noticed in the station a half-hour previous—Maud Placer.

But innocent Sally Haskins knew nothing of the artifices and vices practiced in a great city.

"Yes, ma'am, I am lost," she replied, half-sobbing the words.

"Well, well, dearie, don't feel badly," said Maud Placer, with an artful display of maternal solicitude. "I'll befriend you, my dear. Where do you live?"

"My home is in Nantucket, ma'am."

"Then you're a country girl?"

"Yes, ma'am; I never was in the city before."

"Surely you are not alone here?"

"No, ma'am; my husband came up with me this morning, but I have lost him. I was married only yesterday, and——"

"Well, well, my dear!" interposed Maude Placer, taking the girl by the arm. "Don't cry. Come down this way with me, more out of the crowd, and I'll help you find your husband. Which way did he go?"

"I don't know, ma'am; I'm all twisted around."

"Would you like to have me advise you, my dear?"

"Yes, indeed, I would!" cried Sally, eagerly. "I'll never forget it, ma'am. I don't know which way to turn, nor what to do."

The woman slipped her hand through the arm of the girl and led her away.

"Come up this way with me, my dear, and

we will try to locate your husband in some of the side streets," said she. "There is no use in remaining so near the crowd, as it would be impossible to discover him among so many people. What is he like?"

Although Maude Placer asked this question, she already knew; for she had seen both Reuben Haskins and Sally come from the train, and also had witnessed the episode resulting in their separation. From that moment she had followed Sally, until she found this opportunity to address her.

Now she was leading the girl farther and farther from the scene of the fire, and taking the surest way of preventing her discovery by her friends.

"He's young, like me, ma'am," Sally answered, in reply to her question.

"Have you no friends here in the city?"

"Only one, ma'am. We have a cousin named James Norton."

"That must have been the man I saw meet them!" said Maude Placer to herself.

"We came up here only this morning, ma'am, just for two or three days," Sally went on to explain, little dreaming of the danger by which she was menaced. "Rube had some money to invest——"

"Is Rube your husband, dearie?" interposed Maude Placer, with her ears pricked up at the mention of money to be invested.

"Yes, ma'am, and his full name is Reuben Haskins," said Sally, almost sobbing again, when she thought of the full extent of her distressful situation. "He came up to invest some money, ma'am, and I've got to find him before he can do so."

"Why so, dearie?"

"Because I took his certified check, ma'am, for fear he would lose it, and I now have it sewed in my waist," Sally innocently explained, much to the secret enjoyment and delight of her designing companion. "Now

Rube can't get the money to invest until he has found me."

"You are a dear, innocent lamb!" laughed the woman, giving Sally an affectionate hug. "We shall find him sooner or later, my dear, and meantime I will take care that no harm befalls you."

"This is very kind of you, ma'am, I am sure."

"My name is Placer, dearie, and I'm a very honest and respectable woman."

"Oh, your kind face shows that, ma'am!" exclaimed Sally. "Are you sure we are going the right way, ma'am? I'd like to find Reuben this morning, if I can."

"We will look for him, dear, but it may be impossible to find him so quickly," said Maude Placer, with a shrug of her broad shoulders. "Boston is a large city, you know, and when strangers get separated, it's not always easy to bring them quickly together. We will go down this way, dear, and possibly we shall run across him."

For an hour or more the designing woman kept Sally walking through the city streets, till the girl became weary and more than ever confused.

"Can we not find Mr. Norton's house?" Sally finally inquired, struck by this idea for the first time.

"I will look in my directory when we reach home, dear," said Maude Placer, stopping on a corner to wait for a car, and now satisfied that she had the girl well under her influence.

"Home?" echoed Sally, looking at her with a helpless stare.

"Yes, dear, home!" replied the woman. "There is nothing to be gained by traveling the streets any longer."

"But what am I to do to find Reuben?"

"I will find him for you, my dear, but it will take a little time," was the crafty reply. "When we reach my home, dear, I will

notify the police and set them all looking for him."

"Will they find him, do you think?"

"Yes, and inform him where you are."

"Indeed, I hope so, ma'am!"

"Meantime, dearie, you shall go home with me and remain over night. You can't stay in the streets, you know," she hastened to add, on observing Sally's startled look.

"Where is your home?"

"I have a nice boarding-house out here a little distance. You'll find everything to your fancy, my dear, and possibly your husband will have heard where you are, and come out there this very day."

"You will be sure to inform the police?" pleaded Sally, innocently taking the woman at her word.

"I will do so, dear, the first thing after arriving home."

"I shall be willing to pay my board, ma'am."

"Bless your dear heart, I would not take a cent from you!" exclaimed Maude Placer, drawing closer the helpless girl. "You shall come to my home and welcome, and shall remain there till your husband finds you. Come, dear, here is the car we must take."

And Sally Haskins, as easily blinded by such a woman as can well be imagined, readily followed her into the street and boarded a Brighton car.

CHAPTER VII.

AN EXPOSURE.

Nearly an hour later.

It was approaching six o'clock.

The sun of the June day was running low in the western sky, and the shadows of the elms bordering the suburban highway were lengthening over the dusty thoroughfare and in the meadows beyond.

Yet it wanted full an hour to sunset, and the golden glory of the closing day was shed,

despite the cloudy character of the woman and the place, over the road-house and numerous outbuildings belonging to notorious Maude Placer.

The house itself was a three-story wooden structure, with a piazza and balcony in front and on the south side. Back of the house was a deep yard, the approach to a long stable, and adjoining the latter was a roofed inclosure for the temporary shelter of unhitched teams.

The general appearance of the place was inferior, and its isolation from other habitations, for it stood quite alone in a long, open stretch of the suburban turnpike, was a desirable feature in a resort of its kind.

Despite these rural surroundings and the quietude without, the sound of a piano was wafted through one of the open windows, with the shrill notes of girls' voices singing a popular air; while a fashionable automobile left unattended in the stable yard indicated the presence of visitors in the house—probably two young city sparks out on an afternoon lark.

In a side room on the second floor, about the time Sheridan Keene with his passengers was nearing the house, Maude Placer was seated with the girl, who had believed in her kindly representations, only to be led into a far greater danger than that in which she had been found.

Long ere then this designing woman had learned the girl's entire story, with the precise facts relative to the check in her possession, and she now was racking her brains to hit upon some duplicity by which the money could be safely secured.

But in Sally Haskins' mind vague suspicions already had arisen, and she now wished herself well out of the house, a desire far more easily entertained than executed under the existing circumstances.

"Some of my boarders are singing in the

parlor, Sally," said Maude Placer, craftily watching the girl's timid and doubtful eyes. "Will you go down and join them?"

"No, ma'am; I'd sooner stay here, if you please," said Sally, in tremulous tones. "Have you told the police about Reuben?"

"Yes, indeed, my dear; and the search for him has already begun," said the woman, encouragingly. "I think you had better come down and get acquainted with my——"

Then she suddenly stopped.

She had caught sight of the approaching landau from the window, and an instant later had recognized one of its occupants.

The man she had seen meet Reuben and Sally Haskins at the Union station that morning.

"He is after the girl! How can he have traced her?"

These, with an imprecation, were the first thoughts that flashed through the woman's mind. Though her momentary feeling was that of sudden alarm, Maude Placer was a bold and desperate character; and the thought of releasing the girl, and losing the chance of swindling this country twain out of at least a portion of their money, aroused the worst part of the woman.

Though she maintained a placid countenance, lest she should alarm the girl, she abruptly rose and said to Sally, who was seated back from the window, and had observed nothing:

"At all events, my dear, you must come into another room, as this belongs to one of my lodgers."

"I am willing to do that, ma'am," said Sally, timidly.

"Take your hat and shawl, then, and come along."

"I have them, ma'am."

"Come this way," said Maude Placer, quickly.

She knew that the landau would stop in the driveway directly under the window of the room that they were leaving, and hurrying Sally into a back chamber, that she by no means should observe the man naturally assumed to be her friend, Maude Placer bade her remain quietly there until she returned. Then she closed the door and softly slipped a bolt on the outside, securing the girl in the room.

This having been done, she hastened downstairs, reaching the lower hall just as the landau drew up at the side door.

The bell rang and she opened the door quickly.

"Well, gentlemen," she said, inquiringly, putting her boldest face on the situation; "what can I do for you?"

Keene drove his team into the stable-yard, in order to turn around.

Rogers approached her politely.

"We are seeking a young lady, Mrs. Placer, whom we think may have taken lodgings with you," he said, smiling.

"What is the lady's name, sir?"

"Her name is Sally Haskins."

Maude Placer boldly shook her head, and gave her broad shoulders a shrug.

"I've never heard that name, sir," she rejoined. "There is no such girl here."

"Possibly she may have come here without giving you her true name," said Rogers, suggestively.

"Well, sir, if you have a search-warrant, you may go over the house," the woman curtly returned, with a quick frown.

Again the landau approached the side door, and now it was turned toward the highway. Sheridan Keene sprang down from the box, but he did not enter the hall. He remained standing on the steps just outside the open door, from which he could easily overhear what was said in the hall, and at the same time keep an eye on his horses.

"We have no search-warrant, Mrs. Placer," Rogers replied, with professional suavity; "and have called here only to make inquiries. My name is Norton, and I am looking for a niece who arrived in Boston this morning."

Something in the man's voice and eyes led Maude Placer instinctively to feel that he was crafty, if not deliberately lying. The various circumstances of the affair suddenly appealed to her in a new light.

She glanced again in the direction of the carriage.

Keene had been forced to disguise himself very hastily at the hotel. He now felt his false mustache slipping down. He put up his hand to fix it, and at that instant his eyes met those of the woman looking at him from the hallway.

Accustomed to seeing people disguised, she understood the action in an instant, and now felt convinced that something was wrong.

Keene felt sure that he had been recognized, and was in a quandary as to how the affair would turn out.

The woman continued to watch him as she talked to her callers, but the detective saw to it that no other opportunity was given her to discover his identity. Then he set about some rapid figuring.

"She sees my disguise," he mused. "Now, who does she think I am? Not a friend of these men, surely. If she's as smart as I think she is, she'll put the thing to the test. Now for some developments," and he felt to see if his revolvers were handy. And Mrs. Placer did put them to the test in a way that was surprising.

This woman, bolder even than the men, rose to the situation and seized the bull by the horns.

"Did you say the girl was your niece?" she demanded, curtly.

"Yes, madam."

"And that she arrived in Boston this morning?"

"Just before noon."

"Well, sir, with one exception, all of my lodgers have been here for several weeks," said Maude Placer, curtly.

"And the exception, Mrs. Placer?"

"The exception is a girl who arrived here this afternoon. As you appear to have some doubts of me, sir, will you please step upstairs with me, and you may see the girl. If she is not the one, you'll have to look further."

Both Rogers and Ned Weston assented to this, and followed Maude Placer upstairs; and Sheridan Keene, without moving from his position, allowed them to depart.

To him the recovery of the girl was then of chief importance, and this he knew could be effected by Rogers as well as by himself, assuming her to be there.

But Maude Placer did not lead the way to the room in which Sally Haskins was confined. Instead, she took her companions to a vacant front room, and immediately closed the door.

"What's the meaning of this?" demanded Rogers, sharply.

"Meaning of what?"

"There is no girl here."

"No, but I am here," said Maude Placer, with abrupt vehemence. "Now what game are you two fellows playing, that you have come here like this?"

"Game!" gasped Rogers, turning suddenly pale. "No game at all."

"Oh, don't attempt to jolly with me!" was the woman's angry response. "I am not to be fooled as easily as you have been. The girl you're seeking is here, and I know all about her, and what she has sewed in her waist. You're not a cousin to her, or you'd

not have Sheridan Keene in disguise at your heels——”

The woman had lit on Keene's name more by accident than design. She suspected it was a detective outside, and she knew the effect that Sheridan Keene's name would have on the men before her.

That a detective was driving these men out there in disguise now suggested the idea that he might be shadowing them, and that their interest in Sally Haskins was not what Rogers was representing.

The woman's mind was made up in an instant. She determined to “bluff” these men about the detective, and thus force them to disclose to her their scheme, out of which she proposed to get some benefit, if possible.

The answer which was now given her only confirmed her suspicions.

“You're mad!” cried Rogers, in mingled anger and amazement. “If the girl is here——”

“Oh, no, I'm not mad,” Maude Placer forcibly interrupted, quickly taking a position between him and the door. “You don't go out of this room until I know the truth. You fool, do you know the man who drove you out here?”

“Drove us out here!” exclaimed Rogers, agast. “He is a public cabman.”

“Yes he is—not!” cried Maude Placer, with a bitter laugh. “He is Sheridan Keene, Boston's slickest detective, and it's a hundred to one that you two are working some game to which he has tumbled! Now will you tell me what's up?”

The consternation with which both men heard her vehement words would alone have betrayed them. Weston sprang forward and caught the woman by the wrist, crying in accents of rising desperation:

“Do you mean what you say?”

“You'll find that I mean it.”

“Are you sure of the man?”

“Sure of him!” Maude Placer bitterly rejoined. “If you had been run in by him as many times as I have, you'd be sure.”

“By Heavens, Sam!” exclaimed Weston, turning sharply to his confederate, “I believe this woman may be right. That affair in the café has a very yellow color, now that I think of it. And Kennedy and Keene are names deucedly near alike.”

“You mean the man who received your suit case?”

“Of course!”

“Oh, I am on to all, now,” cried Rogers, angrily. “We are caught between wind and water, and the game is hopelessly up! I see it all, now, and the sooner we make our escape——”

“Wait a bit!” interrupted the woman, still barring with her powerful figure their exit from the room. “What is this game? There yet may be a way to fool Sheridan Keene. He's only a man. He don't know that the girl is here, and I suppose he's not so sure of you. What is the game?”

Impressed by her forceful words, and eager to hit upon any project that would serve their present needs, Rogers quickly disclosed the main facts to Maude Placer, to whom a bold and startling remedy for the desperate situation almost immediately appealed.

“Keep your heads, you fools!” she cried, hurriedly. “There's yet a way out of the scrape.”

“Tell us the way!” exclaimed Rogers, eagerly.

“First of all, am I to be used on the square?” said the woman, with a shrewd eye to her own interests.

“Surely you shall be! I give you my word for it!” cried Rogers, earnestly.

“Tell me your true name, then?”

“I am Sam Rogers, of New York.”

“The confidence man?”

"The same."

"I've heard of you, and I'll take the chance. Make sure you use me on the level, however, or I'll set a man after you who will run you down like a pair of jack-rabbits."

"You mean the man down-stairs?"

"None other," nodded Maude Placer, significantly. "He's the shrewdest and most persistent detective in the whole country, this same Sheridan Keene. Understand me, now, you fellows! If you realize on the check belonging to these hayseeds, I am to have one-third of the money."

"I again give you my word," cried Rogers, impatiently. "Tell us your plan for evading Keene. We are losing time."

CHAPTER VIII.

KEENE RUNS A RACE AND GETS A TUMBLE.

Maude Placer was as cunning as she was unscrupulous and bold. She now saw a way by which to shield herself, and yet possibly accomplish her project. She knew the detective would have no case against her merely for having brought Sally Haskins out there, and she now artfully schemed to have it appear that she was innocent of any co-operation with the two men she then was confronting.

"Listen," she cried, quickly. "Keene don't know this girl is here?"

"Surely not."

"And you have her husband in town?"

"At our rooms."

"Does the detective know where they are located?"

"Impossible!"

"And certainly he is not sure of your identity?"

"He can't be sure of that."

"Then the game is by no means up!" cried Maude Placer, with forceful earnestness.

"What's your idea?"

"You must give Sheridan Keene the slip, and remove the girl at the same time."

"Can it be done?"

"It must be done! The girl thinks you're her cousin, don't she?"

"Surely."

"Then she'll readily obey you, and be glad enough to go away from here. If you can

get her into town, and with her husband again, they will both have redoubled faith in you."

"That's certainly true!" cried Rogers, eagerly.

"And in that case," continued Maude Placer, evolving the infamous scheme with the celerity and skill of a diplomat; "it will be all the easier for you to get Haskins to cash the check and turn the money over to you, in return for your worthless stock certificates."

"Yes, go on."

"This can be done the moment the banks open to-morrow morning, and before Sheridan Keene can possibly have located you. Then you can give these hayseeds the slip, and the money is ours."

"That should be easy!" cried Rogers, now flushed and excited.

"It's out of sight!" cried Weston.

"The chief difficulty lies in getting away with the girl, and in giving Keene the slip."

"That can be done," the woman cried, contemptuously. "Listen to me."

"Go on."

"You two remain here, and be ready to get the girl down-stairs and into the landau."

"Yes."

"She is now in the back room at the end of the hall, and the door is bolted on the outside. You need only open it, and the girl will be glad enough to see you and to depart at once."

"There's no doubt of that."

"Take her down the side stairs and around by the piazza. You know where the landau stands, and one of you must drive into town."

"I will do that!" cried Weston.

"But what about Keene?" demanded Rogers.

"He'll not stand by like a wooden cigar sign and see this done."

"By no means."

"Faugh!" cried Maude Placer, disdainfully. "You leave Sheridan Keene to me. I'll get him out of your way, and don't you forget it. You're never to tell him that I recognized him, however; make sure of that."

"We'll not betray you, come what may."

"Are you ready, then?"

"When you say the word."

"There's only one thing more," the woman hurriedly replied. "When you hear me close a door down-stairs, you'll know the coast is clear."

"We'll listen for it."

"Then get to work at once, and be off with the girl at the top of your speed."

"Leave that to us," cried Weston.

"I'll have Keene in a room with me, and you'll have no trouble from him if you move quickly."

"We'll not lose a moment."

"Come then."

"Lead the way."

Maude Placer softly opened the chamber door and led them into a hall, then silently pointed to the room in which Sally Haskins was to be found. Rogers nodded understandingly, and the woman delayed only to whisper, softly:

"When you hear me close the door below, get to work at once."

Both men gave her a knowing look, and she at once left them and hastened down-stairs.

Sheridan Keene then was standing in the hall, with an eye on his team, and patiently waiting the return of the two swindlers.

"Look here, driver, what's the meaning of this?" Maude Placer resentfully cried, addressing him before she fairly had reached the foot of the stairs.

"Meaning of what?" demanded Keene, gruffly.

"Come here and I'll tell you," the woman angrily rejoined, stepping into a side room near the parlor and forcibly closing an open window.

Sheridan Keene was briefly deceived by the angry tone she was feigning, and he followed her into the room.

"What's the trouble?" he demanded, regarding her sharply.

She closed the door with a bang, as if to prevent being overheard, and, facing him with flushed cheeks and passionate eyes, cried resentfully:

"What are these two men out here for, sir? And what business have they to be

searching through my house and entering every room?"

"They told you their business," said Keene, curtly.

"But they have no warrant, and I'll not stand for such conduct!" cried Maude Placer, angrily stamping her foot. "Do you know who the men are?"

"They are strangers to me."

"Where do they come from?"

"From the Reynolds."

"Are they stopping there? I'll not stand for this insult, I tell you. I'll appeal to the police for aid, and see if I have not redress for——"

Then she suddenly stopped.

Keene's face had changed like a flash. Above the sound of the woman's voice, there had come to his ears the rapid clatter of hoofs, and the cry of a man urging the horses away. Instantly he realized the ruse of which he was being made the victim.

With a half-smothered oath he hurled Maude Placer from his path, tore open the door, and darted out upon the side piazza.

The landau, with Ned Weston on the box, and Sam Rogers and Sally Haskins on the rear seat, was already fifty yards away upon the turnpike and moving at break-neck speed in the direction of the city.

For a moment, even Sheridan Keene was nonplussed.

"What's the matter, driver?" cried Maude Placer, now rushing out upon the piazza. "Have they stolen your team?"

Keene swung round like a man struck from behind.

"Yes, and you're the cause of it," he thundered, angrily. "But it's all right, Maude, my girl, and you yet will pay the fiddler for this little dance. I'll yet run you all to cover."

Before the last word was uttered, his angry voice had taken on a ring of rising resolution and triumph.

He had caught sight of the automobile standing in the stable yard. At a bound he cleared the piazza rail, and ran at the top of his speed to the deserted vehicle.

A glance told him the make of the machine, and that its power was derived from a storage battery. With a single leap he gained the seat, and switched on the current.

The vehicle responded with a jerk that nearly threw him into the air. Then he caught himself, and was away.

A yell rose from Maude Placer on the piazza, and she rushed to the parlor to alarm the owners of the stolen vehicle. Her cry brought every occupant of the room to the front veranda.

They arrived there just in time to see Sheridan Keene, riding at railway speed, turn from the driveway and into the dusty turn-pike.

The swaying automobile made the turn on two wheels only, and yells of wrathful dismay were borne to the detective's ears. Two hens in the road were caught under the wheels, and left squawking and fluttering in the highway. The vociferous yelping of a dog in pursuit augmented the suddenly arisen tumult, and for a moment the scene was one that would baffle description.

Then the vehicle caught its bearings, and was away with the speed of an express train, leaving behind a mighty cloud of rising dust, turned roseate by the crimson rays of the setting sun.

Although not thoroughly familiar with the work of running an automobile, Keene soon discovered that he had applied the full limit of power, and that was all he then wanted. Settling himself at the lever by which the vehicle was guided, he threw his tall hat aside, and with gaze fixed on the road ahead began a chase that was memorable for long weeks after.

The landau was a quarter-mile in advance, with the horses on the dead run.

"The scoundrels have discovered that I am after them," said Keene to himself. "And I will speedily overhaul them, too!"

There was a mile stretch straight away in which to accomplish it, and the detective let the automobile go at her limit.

The driver of an approaching dray saw him coming, and drew to one side of the road to give him way, staring with wide eyes and voice hushed when he tore by him.

At the end of a half-minute Keene had gained a hundred yards.

At the end of a like interval the landau was but a hundred yards ahead.

Weston was lashing his horses to the top

of their speed, and Rogers was holding frightened Sally Haskins to the rear seat, and staring backward through the rolling clouds of dust.

An ugly light rose in his dilated eyes when the automobile suddenly came into closer view through the dust, and he caught sight of the frowning face of the detective.

"Keep 'em going, Ned!" roared Rogers, above the noise of the wheels. "Keep 'em on the run!"

"They're doing their best, Sam, but we can escape him!"

"Keep 'em on the run, I say. I am going to wing him."

"Don't shoot him!" gasped Sally, as white as if dead in her coffin.

For Rogers had drawn a revolver, and now was kneeling on the rear seat and awaiting Keene's approach.

"I am not going to shoot him!" he growled, fiercely. "But I'll take the wind out of that deuced machine!"

Sheridan Keene had seen his movement, and grasped the guiding bar with his left hand, while with his right he drew his revolver.

In another moment the two vehicles were less than twenty feet apart, the automobile to the rear and at one side.

"Slow down, there!" commanded Keene, raising his weapon. "Slow down or I'll fire!"

"Fire and be d——!" shouted Rogers, loosing his hold on Sally in order to steady his aim.

Then a shriek of ungovernable terror rose from the girl's lips. Hearing the words of Keene, she had turned back and had seen the weapon in his hand. Despite the swaying of the landau, she started suddenly to her feet, threw herself in front of Rogers with her arms about him, and shrieked back to the detective at the top of her lungs:

"Don't shoot! Oh, please don't shoot Mr. Norton! Don't shoot my cousin Jim!"

"Jim Norton, eh?" was the thought that flashed to Keene's mind on hearing her words.

Then the report of Rogers' revolver sounded twice on the air.

The bullets crashed into the body of the

automobile, and Keene heard something break beneath him.

The next instant the vehicle swerved violently, plowed its way through a fence bordering the highway, tore diagonally up a bank in the adjoining meadow, and careened over upon its side like a ship in the trough of a mighty sea, pitching Sheridan Keene headlong a dozen feet away.

When he rose to his feet, Sam Rogers was vigorously waving his hand to him from the rear seat of the landau, then more than a hundred yards away.

CHAPTER IX.

A CLEVER ROUND-UP.

At about eight o'clock that same evening, Mr. James Norton, the well-known stock broker of State street, was surprised at receiving a caller in the person of Sheridan Keene, with whom he had long been well acquainted.

"Well, well, Shed!" he exclaimed, familiarly addressing him on entering the fine library in his elaborate bachelor apartments. "What brings you up here?"

"Business, Jimmy, and not of a very pleasant character," replied Keene, who had just arrived in town after squaring up with the owners of the damaged automobile.

"What's the nature of it?" demanded Norton, smiling. "I hope you don't want me for anything off color."

"No, not that, Jim," laughed Keene. "But I heard your name spoken to-day under rather exciting circumstances, and the mention of it gave me a clew to a game I am making an effort to prevent."

"My name?" said Norton, in surprise.

"Yes," nodded Keene, accepting a chair. "Have you been expecting any relatives or friends on a visit to the city?"

"Why, certainly! I am expecting a cousin of mine from Nantucket. He is coming up here next week."

"That's the very party."

"But I do not expect him here before next week," repeated Norton. "I received a letter from him only this morning."

"Let me have a look at it, Jimmy."

"Certainly," said Norton, selecting it from several which he drew from his pocket.

Keene glanced rapidly over it, then returned it.

"That letter is a forgery, Jim," he said, quickly. "Be sure you hang on to it."

"A forgery."

"Nothing less! Your cousin and his wife are already here in town."

"You amaze me!"

"It's a fact, nevertheless," laughed Keene. "And they are in the hands of a pair of very clever confidence men, who this afternoon have served me a very nasty little trick, and very possibly may serve your innocent relatives a worse one."

"Please explain," said Norton, earnestly. "Really, I don't quite understand you."

In a few words Sheridan Keene imparted the whole story, much to James Norton's wonderment, and a genuine regret for the experience which had befallen his friends.

"After receiving this letter, I, of course, did not think it necessary to go to the station this morning," said he. "I naturally supposed it was genuine."

"You were all right in that, Jim."

"Do you know where Haskins is at present?"

"No, I do not," Keene replied. "I have called here to learn, if possible, what business brought him to the city. Can you tell me?"

"Easily!" exclaimed Norton. "He wishes to invest several thousand dollars, and was coming up here to do his business through me."

"Aha! I begin to smell the rat!" exclaimed Keene, with lightening countenance. "Do you know if he intended to bring the money with him?"

"He wrote me that he would bring a certified check."

"Ah, is that so?"

"It will be dreadful if these thieves should secure it! It's about all the money Reuben Haskins has in the world."

"They have not yet secured it," said Keene, with assurance, "or they would have up stakes and cut away long ago. Leave the matter to me, for I think I see a way by which I can take them into camp."

"How so?"

"Evidently one of these scoundrels is palming himself off as James Norton, and very cleverly hoodwinking your innocent cousin," explained Keene. "The rascal now thinks he has given me the slip, and no doubt will be alert to-morrow morning to get Haskins to turn his check into cash and to let go of his money. I will wire to Nantucket to-night, and stop the payment of the check, for it probably is drawn on the bank down there; and in the morning I will be as alert as any of them, you may be sure."

"Do you require any help?"

"Not more than you already have given me," laughed Keene, rising. "I'll bring your cousin around to your office before noon, and introduce him to you. Before the banks open here in town, they all shall be notified of the danger, and instructed what steps to take."

"I guess I am safe enough in leaving it all to you," Norton significantly smiled, extending his hand.

"I think you may feel so," nodded Keene, taking his hat. "I'll see you to-morrow, Jimmy."

At about that same hour there was a very joyful reunion in the rooms rented by Sam Rogers for the promulgation of this confidence game. Reuben Haskins had recovered his bride, and the bride her husband.

That their joy was greater than pen could easily portray, and that their faith in Sam Rogers and Ned Weston was immeasurably increased, may be readily imagined.

Rogers artfully explained the extraordinary episode of the afternoon, and expatiated upon the danger from which he had rescued Sally, incidentally representing Sheridan Keene as one of the prime movers in a plot against her; and during the evening he further prepared the way to relieving Reuben Haskins of his money, by producing a number of worthless stock certificates and making them over in Haskins' name.

"That will expedite matters in the morning, Reuben," he explained; "and all that then will be necessary to winding up the business will be for you to get your check cashed and pay me for the documents. Then you may remain here as long as you wish;

or, if you prefer, return to Nantucket. My motto, you know, is business first and pleasure afterward!"

"I reckon I'll go back on the first train, Cousin Jim," said Haskins, with a dismal grin and head-shake. "I've had all I want of the city."

"Well, I'll see you safely away," laughed Rogers. "And before the summer is out, as like as not I'll run down for a week and visit you."

"That will be fine!" exclaimed Sally, laughing and blushing. "We shall be more than pleased, I assure you."

"Oh, I'll come right enough," nodded Rogers, smiling in his sleeve.

Next morning, just before nine o'clock, two officers were seated in a carriage drawn up at the curbing in front of the great, grim headquarters building in Pemberton square.

A third stood at the telephone in the office of the superintendent of police, ready instantly to receive a call.

It came at precisely five minutes after nine.

Then the officer inside threw open the window, and shouted to those in the carriage:

"The Central National, chief!"

"Corner of Milk and Devonshire!" shouted Chief Watts, from the carriage window.

The driver caught up the reins, and before the chief's voice had ceased echoing from the walls of the lofty building, the vehicle was tearing furiously through Pemberton square.

"You will have to be identified, Mr. Haskins, before we can cash this check," said the teller at the Central National Bank, when Reuben Haskins presented himself at the window that morning.

Sam Rogers stepped forward, smiling complacently.

"I presume you do not know me, sir, but I think perhaps your cashier will recognize me," he said, with polished manner. "I can identify Mr. Haskins, for he is my cousin, and came up from Nantucket only yesterday."

"I will speak to our cashier, sir," replied the teller, signing for a messenger to go to the cashier's room and call him.

The messenger vanished and did not return.

He had business in the telephone closet, in the cashier's private office.

But the cashier himself presently appeared, polite and smiling, and entered the teller's cage.

Meantime Rogers and Ned Weston had kept up a natural flow of conversation with Reuben Haskins and his wife, and the scene was eminently one to have favorably impressed any easily susceptible bank official.

"Is this the check Mr. Haskins desires cashed?" inquired the cashier; then, turning to address the parties outside: "Which of you is Mr. Haskins?"

"I am, sir," said Reuben, innocently.

"And I can vouch for the young man, sir," put in Rogers, stepping forward.

"But you, too, are a stranger to me, sir," smiled the cashier, pleasantly. "Really, since the check is quite large, I feel that I should have Mr. Haskins fully identified."

"I thought you perhaps would recognize me," said Rogers, putting up one of his finest bluffs. "My name is Norton, and I am in the brokerage business in State street."

"The name is familiar, yet——"

"I assure you, sir, that the check is all right."

"Oh, I don't doubt the genuineness of the check, Mr. Norton," smiled the cashier. "I am quite satisfied that the check is perfectly good, and I wish only to feel sure that I am cashing it for the proper party."

"Well, sir, one would almost think that the party spoke for himself," said Rogers, significantly referring to Reuben's countrified appearance.

The cashier joined in the speaker's genial laugh.

He had heard a carriage approach through the street and stop outside.

"Well, well," he now said, pleasantly; "I rather am inclined to think it will be all right. Teller, you may cash the check. What denomination of notes would you prefer, Mr. Haskins?"

"Oh, fifties and hundreds," said Rogers, speaking for the youth.

"Give them the money," said the cashier, bowing to his clerk and withdrawing.

With secret exultation, Rogers watched the clerk make up the packages of bills; and, when Reuben Haskins had received it, the scoundrel smilingly drew him to one side of the public office.

"You had better let me take care of it for you, Reuben," he advised. "We will take it over to my office, and you meantime may hold the stock certificates."

"All right, Cousin Jim," said Haskins, cheerfully letting go of his entire fortune.

"Come on, Ned!"

"All ready?"

"Yes, finally, old boy! Give Mrs. Haskins your arm."

And they all started for the door.

Then a clean-cut, slight-built man, who had just entered, stepped briskly forward with a rather curious smile on his handsome face.

"What are you going after now, Sam?" he demanded, cheerfully. "Two Manhattans?"

Sam Rogers recoiled as if struck in the face, and turned as white as his linen collar.

"The waiter!" he gasped, scarce above his breath.

"Run for it!" cried Weston, sharply. "The game is up!"

Both sprang toward the door, and Sheridan Keene stepped aside to let them pass.

Ere they could reach the threshold, however, there suddenly appeared in the doorway the powerful and imposing figure of Chief Inspector Watts, with two of the city police close behind him.

"Don't hurry, gentlemen!" he exclaimed, feeling in his side pocket. "It's too warm a day to hurry!"

"We are done for!" muttered Rogers, shrinking back.

"Ah, Sam Rogers, you are the fellow, are you?" cried the chief, now recognizing the man. "Well, well, I'm glad to see you! Hold up your hands, both of you! I have a nice pair of bracelets here for each!"

The scene that followed, and the amazement of Reuben and Sally Haskins, may better be imagined than described. Under the escort of Sheridan Keene, who presently told them the truth and relieved them of their mingled astonishment and dismay, the

young country couple were taken over to State street and to Mr. Norton's office, and placed in far better hands than those from which they had, by Keene's splendid efforts, been successfully rescued.

For the crime they had attempted, and the forgery committed, both Rogers and Weston went to the State prison under a sentence of five years.

Maud Placer was brought into court as an accessory, and, through the efforts of a clever lawyer, she was let down with twelve months in the reformatory. The twelve months were more to her, however, than the five years to either of the others.

Pen could not easily describe the gratitude which both Reuben and Sally Haskins vainly endeavored to express to the man who had so befriended them. Words and tears alike proved utterly inadequate; and, simple and appreciative to the last, they later

paid him the only great recognition felt to be in their power.

Playing in the sandy streets of Nantucket on pleasant summer days there now may occasionally be seen a tot of a child, with low hair and soft blue eyes.

Should you go that way and chance to see him, stoop down and take his tiny hand and ask him who he is.

He will look up at you with eyes as deeply blue as the sky seen between great banks of snow-white clouds that sweep above the quaint old island and its quainter people, and reply, still with a childish lisp:

"Sheridan Keene Haskins!"

THE END.

Next week's SHIELD WEEKLY (No. 1) will contain "The Mysterious Signal; Sheridan Keene on the Water Front."

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